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SUBJECT: EUR DAS Kramer Meets Analysts, Civil Society
Leaders and Students

Ref: Minsk 192

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Visiting EUR DAS David Kramer met with political analysts, civil society leaders, and students on February 24 to discuss the upcoming presidential elections and the accompanying GOB harassment. Analysts noted Russia's change in policy from previous campaigns to support President Lukashenko from the onset of the election campaign and the opposition's inability to lead the country in the slim chance that they would win the election. Civil society leaders doubted the possibility of protests during the election due to increasing arrests of opposition activists and lack of independent media. Students noted the unprofessional manner of the GOB's propaganda, but asked DAS Kramer to explain U.S. criteria in determining whether an election is democratic and opined that countries must find their own path to development. End Summary.

Analysts Speak

¶2. (C) On February 24, Kramer met with Belarusian political analysts Oleg Manaev of the IISEPS sociological polling center, and Valery Karbalevich and Leonid Zaiko from the Strategy think tank. Responding to a question from Manaev, Kramer opened by describing USG efforts to date to engage Russia on Belarus. He said that the GOR seems to have made up its mind to support Lukashenko, but Kramer and Under Secretary for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns asked Moscow

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on a recent visit to reinforce with Minsk that any use of violence is completely unacceptable.

Moscow Supports Lukashenko

¶3. (C) Karbalevich commented that Moscow is taking a very different position than it did in earlier Belarusian elections. He said that in the 2001 presidential elections, Moscow took a good look at all the candidates before Putin decided to support Lukashenko a month before voting. In the 2004 parliamentary elections and presidential term-limit referendum, Russian press remained critical of the GOB and the official election results through the process. In contrast, now Moscow has made it very clear, through public statements and cheap natural gas, that it supports Lukashenko. Karbalevich argued that Moscow fears a color revolution in Minsk and will defend Lukashenko to the end, even if this leads to serious conflict with the West. Zaiko echoed this argument,

claiming that a year ago some in Moscow supported pro-democracy forces within the former Soviet Union. Now, Putin is clearly supporting Lukashenko. Zaiko maintained Russia views the March presidential election as strategic, hoping it will initiate a conservative wave across the FSU.

Candidate Strategies

¶4. (C) A few days before this meeting state television, as mandated by the Election Code, allowed each candidate 30 minutes of airtime. Kozulin devoted his time to a fiery attack on Lukashenko. Karbalevich noted there had been no official reaction to Kozulin's broadside, and argued that Lukashenko was in shock and does not know how to respond. He said that the politicized public seemed to prefer Kozulin's broadcast, but that regular people liked Milinkevich's better. Karbalevich criticized Milinkevich for spending his television time giving concrete answers to questions from the public, rather than trying to present any alternate program. Manaev stated this is because Milinkevich has no plan in case he wins the elections. The United Civic Party, part of Milinkevich's 10 Plus coalition, does have detailed economic plans (libertarian free market). However, other 10 Plus members, such as the Belarusian Popular Front and the Social Democrats support more of a statist/Soviet economic model. If he wins, Milinkevich would have to choose one of these paths. For now, this fissure is preventing him from being able to articulate a strong program.

¶5. (C) Manaev and Zaiko argued that Kozulin is still thinking of dropping out of the race early. Such a move would be preferable to trailing Milinkevich in the polls, and would allow him to remain a credible presidential candidate in the future. They agreed that Kozulin fancies himself to be the candidate of Russia and the nomenklatura; however they said Russia does not see any serious challenger to Lukashenko. They also agreed that, despite his campaign smear tactics, Kozulin is not what Lukashenko was when he was elected in 1994. At that time Lukashenko had spent a year working with the populace, which Kozulin has not done. Even so, he is likely to win more votes than will Gaidukevich.

What Economic Miracle?

¶6. (C) Zaiko stated that Lukashenko called for early elections partially because of future economic risks. There are rumors Russia will raise gas prices for Belarus in mid-year, and the currently favorable external market could change. A fall in international oil prices would especially hurt Belarus. Domestically, he said that consumption is down and that salaries are high for the region. Belarusian banks are facing some problems, even if there is no risk of a meltdown, and January's cold snap caused the state to spend too much money on energy.

Repression

¶7. (C) Manaev opined that the recent arrests of NGO activists were just the beginning of the regime's repression. He believes the GOB will use targeted strikes against certain NGOs to destroy the opposition's ability to observe the election and challenge official results (reftel). The regime will ensure that, at least officially, the opposition candidates get less than 10% of the vote. If they were known to even reach 30%, that would tell the Belarusian people there is an alternative to Lukashenko. Such an outcome is unacceptable to the regime. Karbalevich pointed out that in 2001 three journalists were arrested after the election. This year he expects many more people to be arrested.

¶8. (C) Karbalevich predicted that if 3,000 to 5,000 protesters turned out after Election Day, the GOB would not

resort to violence. If more took to the streets, Lukashenko would feel threatened and would use force. A staunch Lukashenko supporter, Colonel Pavlichenko, commands a brigade of police in Minsk that would stop at nothing to defend Lukashenko's victory. If exit polling shows that it was genuinely a close race, then people would protest falsification. On the other hand, Karbalevich stressed that no one would take to the streets if it was clear no opposition candidate got a majority of the votes.

Popularity and the Press

¶9. (C) Manaev stated that Lukashenko is likely to receive around 60% of the vote, and Kozulin and Milinkevich would together receive around 30%. The rest would be for Gaidukevich or would be genuinely spoiled ballots. In Minsk, Lukashenko would get 50% to the opposition's 40%. He agreed these numbers could change if the opposition has steady and continuous access to the media, but they do not. In a recent success, Manaev explained that Milinkevich's travels to Europe were covered by the Russian-language service of EuroNews. These broadcasts reached an estimated one million Belarusians, which far outweighs all those reached by independent newspapers and foreign radio. Manaev suggested that further EuroNews coverage could be the best way to advertise for Milinkevich, however he said he understands the French editor of EuroNews, in Lyons, is against Belarusian coverage for some unknown reason.

Civil Society Leaders Doubt Change Possible

¶10. (C) Kramer met with ZUBR press secretary Aleksandr Atroschenkov, Perspektyva NGO leader Anatoly Shumchenko, Belarusian Helsinki Commission (BHC) Head Tatiana Protko, Head of the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) Zhanna Litvina, and Vitebsk grassroots activist Olga Karach. Kramer once again condemned violence during Election Day, but stated that people had a right to demonstrate peacefully.

Belarusians Not Ready for Protests

¶11. (C) Karach claimed Belarusians were not ready to contest election results because if they were not willing to demand better jobs and lower utility costs, then they were definitely not ready to demand political rights. ZUBR press secretary Atroschenkov disagreed, predicting thousands of Belarusian youth would take to the streets, but his comment was met with laughter from the other civil society leaders.

GOB Has the Media, and Hence, Controls the People's Minds

¶12. (C) BAJ Head Litvina told Kramer that the GOB has liquidated most of Belarus' remaining independent media, leaving the opposition candidates limited opportunities to gain publicity and counter the state media's smear campaign. According to recent BAJ monitoring of the state press, Lukashenko gets most of the coverage and is shown in a positive light, whereas Milinkevich and Kozulin receive little coverage, and it is always negative. If the news is not praising Lukashenko or discrediting the opposition, it is exploiting Belarus' stability and convincing the population that the presidential elections will be free and fair. Karach noted that many Vitebsk citizens had complained to her about authorities forcing people to sign in support of Lukashenko. However, the same people who complained still believe the elections will be democratic. According to Karach, this is the result of the state-controlled media.

GOB Continues to Detain Activists

¶13. (C) The civil society leaders reported an increase in detentions and arrests of political activists. Atroschenkov passed Kramer a list of numerous police detentions and brutalities against ZUBR activists. BHC Head Protko predicted BHC would be forced to pay a USD 75,000 fine and feared she would soon be jailed for tax evasion.

U.S. Needs To Pressure Russia

¶14. (C) The civil society leaders thanked Kramer for U.S. support, but claimed that U.S. resolutions and public statements against Belarus no longer worked. The USG needed to do more to pressure the Lukashenko regime, including focusing more attention on the Kremlin's support of Lukashenko, if democratic change is to occur in Belarus. Protko opined that the Kremlin is using Belarus as a testing ground for political policies that President Vladimir Putin would later implement in Russia. [Comment: Post has heard this from several sources.] Litvina cited Russian Defense Minister Ivan Ivanov's recent statements that Russia was prepared to prevent an uprising in Belarus. If the U.S. wanted to support democracy in Belarus, it would have to pressure Russia.

Kramer Meets With Students

¶15. (C) Kramer met with university students who had spent a year in the U.S. in the FLEX student exchange program. Kramer told the students that they were the future of their country and that Washington was interested in the development of democracy in Belarus. He also stressed the U.S.' condemnation of violence during the elections. Kramer maintained that the U.S. would continue to support civil society in Belarus in close cooperation with the EU in order to end Belarus' self-imposed isolation. He posited that exposing Belarusian youth to other cultures was important for the country's development and for that reason the U.S. opposes GOB efforts to restrict exchange programs.

Students Want Change

¶16. (C) The students explained that the younger generations wanted change, but the older generations feared it because state propaganda showed only negative aspects of the West and the opposition gave no viable option. One student told Kramer that democracy could not be forced on people and that every nation needed to find its own path. Kramer admitted that democracy was not perfect, but it was the best form of government available. He then explained to the students the role of free press in democracy and lamented its absence in Belarus.

What Makes a Democratic Election?

¶17. (C) The students asked Kramer how the U.S. would determine whether the upcoming presidential elections in Belarus would be free and fair. Kramer responded that OSCE observers would determine the election's legitimacy after reviewing cases of fraud and abuse, equal access to voters, freedom to campaign, access to media, vote tallying, and observer access. Kramer noted that all indications suggested that the Belarusian authorities are not conducting the electoral process in a free and fair manner, but stressed that it was not too late for the GOB to make improvements. Students mentioned that university officials, using threats of expulsion, force them to vote early for Lukashenko and said a similar system existed in the military. Kramer emphasized that the U.S. was following the situation in Belarus very closely and that the international community has not forgotten Belarus.

¶18. (C) Other topics covered during the roundtable included the role of big business in supporting un-democratic regimes, a perceived deliberate exaggeration of the terrorism threat by the U.S. to use force to clamp down on differing opinions, and the lack of professional standards in the state-controlled Belarusian media, particularly their attacks on the employees of the U.S. Embassy.

Comment

¶19. (C) Kramer's meetings once again reiterated that the upcoming presidential elections would not likely yield any change. The political analysts and civil society leaders agreed that Russia, not Belarusians who are paralyzed by fear and manipulated by the state media, is the one column supporting Lukashenko. Only the students, although they did not outright express it, gave hope that Belarus would one day become a democratic country.

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